

Remnants of the future. Artefacts of polish cybernetic poetry as seen today

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Cybernetic poetry (or cyberpoetry) was a short-lived and interesting excess of Polish digital literature in the 2010s. While the movement involved only a few people, it has already been a subject of scientific investigation, including articles, PhD theses and references in schoolbooks. For the artists related to it, software served as a medium to transcend the borders of literature and venture into visual arts and interactive media. They took up a position between two distinct art worlds, each founded on a different set of rules. This gave them the courage and inspiration to envision an entirely new model for the circulation of artworks. Why use stale, printed books when you can express yourself with colourful, interactive forms? What use is the idea of the original, copyrighted or limited print runs when everyone can copy and disseminate files online? Why should anyone cling to those obsolete tools? Cyberpoets claimed that the future is now and that the arts have to fully embrace the economy of sharing.



Figure 1. Perfokarta. Screenshot of the website.

To Leszek Onak, the programming was the realisation of the poetry's ideal: a language that creates worlds, not merely describes them. So, cyberpoetry was the next step in the evolution of the poetic medium – one that was expected to surpass its static ancestors and exploit new possibilities offered by computers and networks. Sounds cool, doesn't it? Yet it was cyberpoetry that went extinct, not the printing presses or the poetry readings organised in cafeterias.

In this paper, I offer a short tour through the works of cyberpoets and the sites they used for online gatherings. We will see what was left of their bold creativity, whether we can still make sense of the artefacts left by this mysterious tribe and what can we learn from them, if anything.

Perfokarta, the eternal machine

Perfokarta,¹ initiated by untiring Roman Bromboszcz, was the first step towards the new art. Back in 2005, in a different era, a group of five artists (the already mentioned Roman Bromboszcz, along with Marek Florek, Szczepan Kopyt, Tomasz Misiak and Łukasz Podgórní) signed the Manifesto of Cybernetic Poetry. Afterwards, the list of artists involved in the project expanded to 16. And yet, in practice, Perfokarta was never an art collective in which everyone acted together but, rather, a “container for personnel”, as the website describes it. Moreover, Roman Bromboszcz was the only one to decide who should be in that container and who should not.

In a display of its timelessness, Perfokarta's site maintained its appeal of a classic web design: there is a current date at the top of the screen, a visitor counter at its bottom, showing over 120,000 visits (I am sure bots were included), and an indicator of the last update (February 2022). Subpages can be selected through combo boxes, which is a practice specific to this website.

Roman Bromboszcz still curates the site. Every time I visit the site, small things change place, and bits of text are added or removed. He is the lone custodian of this haunted archive, the only one with a key. As we'll see later, the question of having a key – being in control of the online content – turns out to be a very important factor in the history of cyberpoetry.

1 Perfokarta, <https://perfokarta.net/> (accessed: 10.09.2023).

The First Manifesto of Cybernetic Poetry

The original Manifesto of Cybernetic Poetry was a moving object coded in ActionScript – the content of the manifesto exploded in the viewer's face with the noise of a starting engine. It was difficult to read and comprehend, yes, but that was part of the plan.

If you manage to find the manifesto within Perfokarta's exotic user interface, you will find not the original multimedia, but a static document. This is a scan of the original manifesto that was printed in 2006 in one of the Polish literary magazines and then uploaded as a PDF. The reason for this is simple: the original was created in Shockwave Flash (SWF) using ActionScript, a technology discontinued in 2019. SWF was a widely popular format for distributing multimedia online throughout the 2000s and 2010s but was superseded by HTML5. In consequence, the plugin (Shockwave Player) was removed from browsers as a security risk.

Although there are open-source reconstructions of Flash technology that accurately reproduce the original content, it requires the user to purposely find the plugin and install it. Roman Bromboszcz sensibly predicted that most people would not do it and provided an effortless alternative. The original audiovisual impact of the manifesto was sacrificed in the name of accessibility. In this context, it is worth mentioning that even the first version of the Perfokarta site was written in Flash and then remade into HTML.

The lessons of Roman Bromboszcz

The idea to provide a scan instead of the original is just one of Roman Bromboszcz's efforts to preserve cyberpoetry. As an artist, he created both offline and online works: traditional, written poetry and one that was more experimental; he played live music and performed on stage. His interactive works are the ones I consider most representative of his artistic vision – works that were, of course, created in ActionScript and compiled into Shockwave Flash files.

Roman found an artful way to preserve his works beyond obsolete technology. He recorded himself interacting with Flash applications and uploaded these clips to YouTube. This way, the audience can experience his works the way he imagined them. While it is no longer an interactive experience, it is at least a way to engage with cybernetic poetry. I find it endearing and clever.

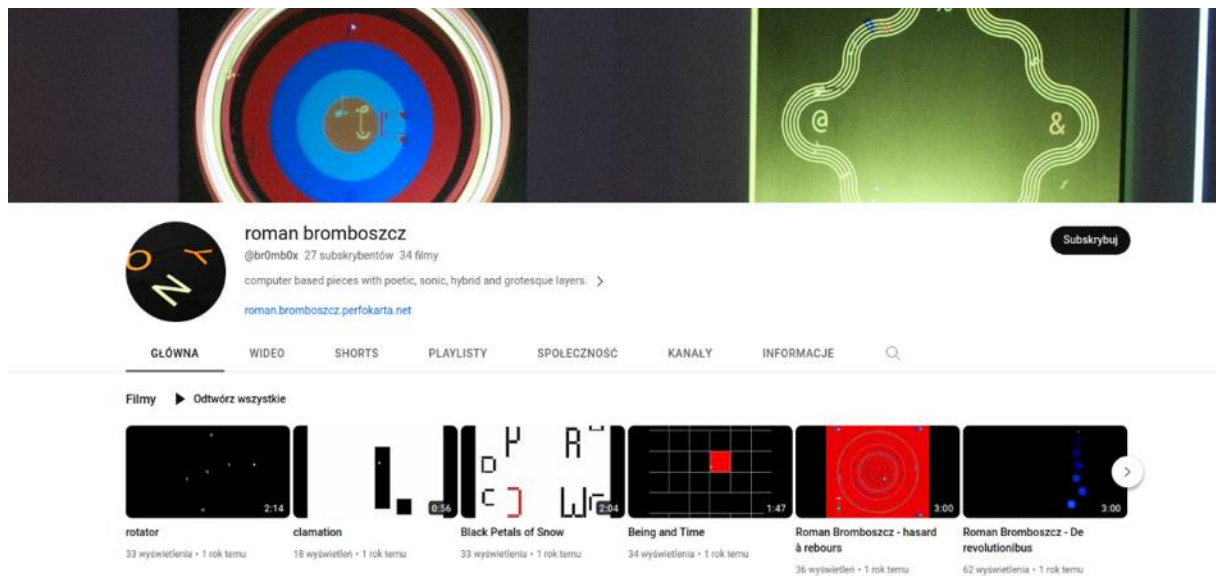


Figure 2. Works of Roman Bromboszcz. Screenshot from the artist's YouTube channel.

The spirit of Rozdzielczość Chleba

In late 2011, Leszek Onak and Łukasz Podgórní launched an art collective and publishing house Rozdzielczość Chleba (Bread's Resolution). The group soon grew with new members such as Julia Girulská, Kinga Raab, Wojtek Stępień, Arek Wierzba, Aga Zgud and myself.

Rozdzielczość Chleba began with a manifesto written by Onak and Podgórní that was then signed by other members of the group. The text offered a vision in which the traditional monopolies on content delivery got crushed and everything was free to circulate. The group published its books online, not expecting any remuneration. Freedom from money was seen as freedom from the capitalist economy and its constraining pursuit of material success.

The manifesto was embedded on the website with a proprietary plugin provided by Issuu – a website used to host scans of online magazines. Issuu was popular before in-browser PDF plugins were widely adopted and, until then, was the only place to present content of such files. Since changes to Issuu's policy on embeds, the file is unavailable to read on the Rozdzielczość Chleba's website. Fortunately, the text itself is impossible to find in other places.



Figure 3. Leszek Onak and Łukasz Podgórní, Manifest Rozdzielczości Chleba, 2011. Screenshot from the Issuu website.

The collective disbanded in 2018 after personal disagreements. The site still resides on my personal server, and I also pay the yearly domain fee of around 20 euros. In time, the unattended Wordpress installation will break or be hacked. Some of internal links are already broken. Nevertheless, the site and most of its content are accessible.

Łukasz Podgórní's elusive persona

It is difficult to say what Łukasz Podgórní's main artistic domain was. He wrote poetry, recorded music, ran a music label and a publishing house, and created interactive works, sculptures and digital graphics. His original homepage was hosted on a free service that is no longer available. After that, he moved to blogspot, then to Tumblr and

Instagram. In 2014, he experimented with a short-lived Ello, then used Facebook fan pages to perform different personas.

Fortunately, there is an authoritative source on this elusive artist – a recording of Podgórni explaining ideas behind his works during a conference or a meeting held in 2015 in Katowice titled *Hipertekstowo*. While the author himself moves swiftly between media, an institution pins him – at least for a moment – and provides us, digital archaeologists, with an insight into his thoughts.



Figure 4. Łukasz Podgórni. Screenshot from a YouTube video.

Leszek Onak's page not found

Leszek Onak was a figure crucial to the cyberpoetry movement and a broader online community focused on literature. A talented artist and a creative organiser, he invented *litenet.org* – a poetry-centred social media portal that became a focal point for discussions in the mid-2010s, until its demise after a lost battle with trolls.

Personal problems forced Onak to delete his homepage and cut ties with colleagues from the cyberpoetic movement. His website, ominously named *http404* – codename for “page not found” error – is currently unavailable. It seems that Leszek deleted or renamed the *index.html* file, which provided the browser with an entryway to the content. The fine print reads: “Error 404 – Everything makes sense but you. Come to your senses.”

If you know the direct links, it is possible to access Onak's works, as they still reside on the server. However, an attempt at accessing one of his most beautiful works, *Kręgosłup czasu* (*A spine of time*), ends with an offer to download a SWF file. What is one supposed to do with that?

Techsty, a theoretical strongpoint

Techsty magazine focuses on literature and new media is still going strong, albeit the frequency of new issues decreased significantly. The chief editor, Mariusz Pisarski, has run the magazine since 2003 and still occasionally updates the website, ordering new artworks from cyberpoets or their rare successors.

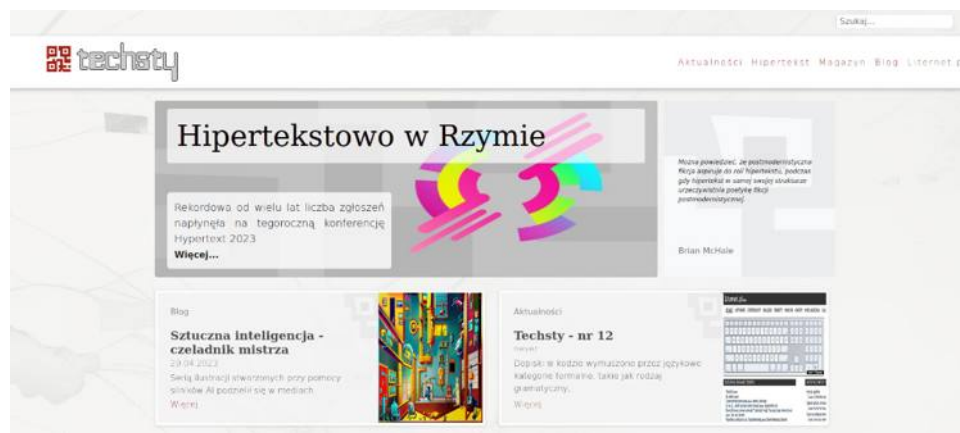


Figure 5. Techsty. Screenshot from the Techsty's homepage.

One interesting feature of this website is that it does not use any content management system (such as Wordpress). This means that every issue is a distinct webpage preserved with a particular layout and design decisions characteristic to its time. It seems that there is no database that would unify the resources. Some links are dead, while others work only if clicked within a particular context (e.g., you cannot go from issues 1–8 to 9 and beyond). This makes *Techsty* not only an archive of theoretical discussions on cyberpoetry but also an archive of web design and ideas about how the net should work. Pisarski created most of it himself – as he is not only a researcher and archivist, but also an artist.



Figure 6. Piotr Puldzian Płucienniczak and Mateusz Simon, *Złe Słowa*, 2013. Screenshot from the Liternet's website.

Liternet, our final stop

After Leszek Onak decided to close his social media platform, Liternet, the indispensable Pisarski took over the domain and used it to create the Archive of Polish Digital Literature. Almost 40 works from different authors from 1999 until the late 2010s are now included in the archive. Unfortunately, most works are hosted on external servers that are out of Mariusz's power.

The screen above shows my own work titled *Złe słowa* (*Angry words*) created together with Mateusz Simon in 2013. It was hosted on a server of its publisher, Korporacja Ha!art, which since then has changed its directory structure. The file is, in fact, available on the server if you change the domain to: "archiwum.ha.art.pl". Of course, the artwork was compiled in ActionScript, so it does not work on modern browsers. From the perspective of a casual viewer, the file might be as well irreversibly deleted.

The end and what's left?

Cyberpoets promised us a revolution, but they were not prepared for one. There are still traces of their activity left online if you know where to look. Some of the contents are archived on The Wayback Machine; there are also a few open-source plugins to play Flash files.

If there is a lesson to take from the story of the cybernetic poetry movement in Poland, it is a story of the importance of open standards, including open protocols; the importance of archives, hardware and infrastructure. Perhaps you cannot prevent imagining the future world using tools at hand, be it ActionScript and the bare HTML files of the late 2000s or the corporate social media of the 2010s. Radical imagination requires a true revolution – one that would go beyond what is readily available and provide entirely new modes of creation and distribution; ones that rely on sustainable community engagement rather than on corporate goodwill. But whether such communities exist – that’s another story.

How can you launch a revolution using proprietary coding tools and virtual hosting? Well, at least we tried, and I think it was worth a shot.

Bibliography:

1. Perfokarta. <https://perfokarta.net/> [accessed: September 10, 2023].